



Book Review

of

Amanda Arbouin - *Black British Graduates: Untold Stories*. 2018

Stoke-on-Trent: Trentham Books

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Abstract:

Arbouin's text tracks the educational experiences and career outcomes for ten African and Caribbean British graduates. In this review Pauline Muir provides a synopsis of some of the key themes.

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Education is viewed as a prized value in most households of African Caribbean migrants. Many of the Windrush generation, although lacking knowledge about the British education system, encouraged their offspring to pursue further and higher education for career advancement. Furthermore, many, like myself following in our parents' footsteps, still place a high premium on education and are keen to see our children pursue the route to higher education (H.E.) despite increased fees and greater competition in the sector. Unfortunately, in a British society riddled with inequality, racism and dwindling resources, H.E. is still possibly the only way that marginalised groups can gain social mobility. While there are policy papers and some academic material on the experience of minorities in H.E., we know little about the personal, educational, and professional journeys undertaken by Black graduates in the U.K. Arbouin's book addresses this gap. It is a welcome and highly engaging contribution to this area of knowledge.

The book provides a rich data set spanning an extended period. It focuses on the careers and educational experiences of ten H.E. graduates of African Caribbean parentage. Tracking not just the outcomes and the psychological trauma encountered by this group, Arbouin also explores how issues of race, ethnicity, and social class impact on their experiences. Drawing on theoretical frameworks from reproduction theory, critical race theory, and Black feminist theory, she skilfully weaves the narratives of these ten male and female respondents using an intersectional method. She traces their experiences from primary school in the 1970s to their graduate careers in the noughties. Using a life trajectory approach, the author provides rich insight into the failure of the U.K. educational system as a whole to provide adequately for the needs of this group of Black students. The book also includes rich biographical details of incidents of negative stereotyping, low teacher expectation of Black students, poor advice on career choices, financial difficulties, as well as the personal and social costs associated with being a Black adult learner. In addition, the book vividly dramatizes issues raised by recent campaigns such as "Why isn't my professor Black?" and "Why is my curriculum white?". The author's review of post-graduation experiences also reflects the negative impacts of the education experience of these Black graduates, which continued into their

employment. The narratives show that issues of marginalisation and disappointment with professional networks still prevail despite their achievement of H.E. qualifications.

Despite the bleak picture painted of these graduates' experience there is much to be celebrated. The graduate and in some cases postgraduate achievements of the respondents are all the more remarkable when one reads that all but two of the ten left school with five or more GCSEs graded at A-C. Undeterred by their mostly negative schooling experiences and extended periods in post-compulsory education, the drive and resilience of the respondents has enabled them to gain success in their respective fields against the odds. We see them deploying their agency and availing themselves of the support extended by family, church, and other community networks in the face of microaggressions, a lack of diversity in teaching staff and a sense of isolation.

I was particularly interested in the attention that the author gives to their love of learning, and the pleasure that is gained by involvement in the education process. So, for the respondents, particularly the females, engagement in the process is not merely an instrumental exercise, but one which is deeply rooted in their soul and inner longings. This section makes for fascinating reading and is something that I recognise in my own educational journey, but not a topic that I have encountered previously in research work on Black graduates.

Qualitative research of this type is by necessity limited by the experience of one's respondents. Nonetheless, I would have been interested to see results from a more diverse group of respondents as most were from a Jamaican background with a few from St Kitts and Nevis. While strategic essentialism and experiences of racism have demanded that we view Black as a homogenous entity, it would have been interesting to see whether a greater diversity of persons from African and Caribbean backgrounds would have produced more variegated findings. It would also have been interesting to explore, for example,

whether the enormous sacrifices for a private education made a qualitative difference to their educational and employment outcomes.

Nonetheless, this critique does not undermine the importance of the text and its value to a wide range of audiences. First, the richness and the deeply personal nature of the narrative style emphasises the importance of Black people writing their own stories. This is not to assert that people of other backgrounds are unable to produce informative research on such a topic. However, Arbouin's status as a 'situated knower' brings a deep affinity and an understanding of the context and the issues. Second, the text is also important for educationalists, academic staff, and policymakers, who may or may not be surprised at the outcomes and the need to consider systems, policies, and working practices in relation to the issues raised. Third, the book will be essential reading for African Caribbean parents, students and those committed to working towards a more equal and just society. One of the most gratifying elements noted in the book is the report that on completing their education graduates were committed to using the knowledge gained from their experiences to find solutions and create a positive change in the education process. I believe that with this type of giving back to the Black community, we will eventually see the changes that are necessary to ensure that the unswerving belief and high value that the Windrush generation placed in education will become a reality for many more Black British Graduates.



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